

ASK Magazine

By practitioners for practitioners

Issue 7

STORIES



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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How I Love My 80 Percenters

by Anthony J. Maturo

Don't ever take your support staff for granted. By support staff, I mean the people in personnel, logistics, and finance; the ones who can make things happen with a phone call or a signature, or by the same token frustrate you to no end by their inaction; these are people you must depend on.

I've spent a lot of time thinking about how to cultivate relationships with my support staff that work to the advantage of both of us. The most important thing that I have learned working with people, any people--and I will tell you how I learned this in a minute--is there are some folks you just can't motivate, so forget it, don't try; others you certainly can with a little psychology and some effort; and the best of the bunch, what I call the *80 percenters*, you don't need to motivate because they're already on the team and performing beautifully.

The ones you can't change are rocks. Face up to it, and just kick them out of your way. I have a reputation with the people who don't want to perform or be part of the team. They don't come near me. If someone's a rock, I pick up on it right away, and I will walk around him or her to find someone better.

The ones who can be motivated I take time to nurture. I consider them my projects. A lot of times these wannabes are people who want to help but don't know how. Listen, you can work with them. Lots of people in organizations have the mindset that all that matters are the regulations. God forbid if you ever work outside those regulations. They've got one foot on that regulation and they're holding it tight like a baby holds a blanket.

What you're looking for is that first sign that their minds are opening. Usually you hear it in their vocabulary. What used to sound like "We can't do that...the regulations won't allow it...we have never done this before," well, suddenly that changes to "We have options...let's take a look at the options...let me research this and get back to you."

The *80 percenters* you want to nurture too, but they're already on the team. The *80 percenters* know the regulation, but if there is a problem because of a regulation, they will still tell you, "Don't worry about it, I've got it under control." These people don't see themselves as guardians of the regulations. Instead, they see themselves as customer service representatives. Two *80 percenters* on my team are Hettie Courtney at Goddard Space Flight Center and Debbie Randall at NASA Headquarters in Code B. Thank you, ladies, very much. You are the best.

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*How I Love My 80 Percenters (cont'd)***Back to Basics**

I said I would talk about how I learned to work with support people. My greatest education came before I was at NASA in what may seem the unlikely of places. While I was an elementary school principal in Fairfield, Connecticut, I learned that my best ideas could never be implemented unless I had my support people at the school behind me. These were people like the janitors, the cafeteria workers, the school nurse, the librarians, the bus drivers. For example, if I wanted the kids to be proud of the school and take care of it, the rooms had to be kept tidy and neat. If Sam the janitor didn't line the chairs up, what did that tell the kids about how the adults felt about the school?

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Here's another example. I wanted everyone who worked for me to respect each other, so I instituted a "switch day" twice a year. I would be the third grade teacher for a day, and she would be principal. The school nurse would teach gym, and the librarian would work as the cafeteria monitor. Everybody got a chance to experience a day at the school from someone else's perspective. The point was to show that we were all working as a team and that everybody was contributing.

What kind of rewards did this yield? I remember going into the cafeteria one time and seeing a group of first graders spilling milk all over themselves. You ever open up one of those milk cartons kids are expected to drink out of? Well, you should try one day, because it's not easy.

I wanted the kids to have a good lunch period. I didn't want them spilling their milk all over themselves. I wanted them to be comfortable, so that when they got back to their classrooms they could settle down, they weren't frustrated, and it wasn't a burden on the teachers. This meant I had to ask the teachers on duty in the cafeteria and the cafeteria workers to help the kids open their milk cartons. The teachers didn't want to pay for this later with disturbances in their classrooms because the kids were frustrated. Someone was going to have to clean up the mess, and that was going to be those cafeteria workers. People could see that what affected one person spilled over (pun intended) into other people's work.

When you ask people to do more than what's narrowly defined by their positions, you have to be willing to show you too will step outside the box. Sometimes when it was real cold outside I would tell the teacher to go inside and I would stay out on the playground to watch the kids. They knew I was doing them a favor because their contract stated that they had to be out there with the kids. Doing things like this made it possible to get the same kind of help in

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How I Love My 80 Percenters (cont'd)

“When you ask people to do more than what’s narrowly defined by their positions, you have to be willing to show you too will step outside the box. ”



Astronauts stand out from the rest of the team, but no one would get off the ground without the hard work of the unsung *80 Percenters*.

return. For example, I wanted the teachers to come out and meet the students when they got off their busses in the morning, especially in the cold when there was ice on the ground. The kids could slip as they got off the bus. I knew the teachers preferred to be in their classrooms, or in the teacher's lounge, smoking and drinking coffee. I could have bullied them, but I believe nurturing people is a better way to get them to move to where you want to go. I kidded around with them. I bought them little boots to wear. They saw me out there too.

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How I Love My *80 Percenters* (cont'd)

By and large, what I found is that if you start nurturing people, if you respect them and try to understand them, they will try to understand you too, and everyone starts playing as a team.

My 80 Percenters, And How They Work For Me

It's always tough when a person I've nurtured and has become an 80 percenter has to leave. I had this happen recently with a gal in Procurement. At the start she was a wannabe, and I worked hard with her. To come that far, I hated to lose her. She left to take care of her sister who had cancer. What can you say? A person's got to do what she has to do. I could gnash my teeth and get all frustrated, but that doesn't solve my problem of filling that void.

The person we brought in to replace her I've been working with for a few months now, and she's coming up to speed. It's a great feeling I get when I know the change has occurred, like the first time I ask them to bend around the requirement, and I don't hear any objection to this.

You know that people are on the team when you hear them say, "Hey, do you mind if I take a cut at this first?" When they come to me and say, "Hey, Tony, did you ever think of doing it this way?" At that point I know they're on the team. When I start hearing that, the commitment, the passion, the understanding, it's there and they're motivated.

When you've worked with enough people as I have, you have a cadre of experienced *80 percenters* around to help out when newcomers arrive. "Look, this is how you deal with Tony," they told my girl in Procurement. "Yeah, he's a pain in the butt, but this is what he needs, and this is why he's got a lot of pressure on him." Now it's not just me anymore doing the nurturing. It's just like when I was a school principal. You want the team to see all our work as interdependent and that helping each other is as important as helping me. The more staff you have who see it this way, the easier your job becomes in bringing people along.

It's The Nurturing, Stupid

It's not enough just to work with them, and then leave them alone. You can do that, but if you really want to put a crack team in place you must continue to nurture them. The way you do this is by recognition.

Whenever I can, I try to show I appreciate their contributions. For instance, I have some young ladies who handle my invoices. Right before their evaluations

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come up, I will talk with their managers and tell them what a great job they are doing for me. I bring Ed Hoffman, the APPL Director, to visit them when he stops by. "You know who this young lady is?" I say to him. "She's the one who takes care of all of our invoices. She's done a hell of a job. Tell them how many you missed." "I didn't miss any," she says. "See that, Dr. Hoffman. This is the kind of person you have working for you." I make sure that he understands the people he rarely notices are contributing to the success of his program.

You want people to feel like they are part of a team, and understand that their contributions to the team matter. Respect the people you expect things out of and you are much more likely to get more than you bargained for from them. No one works harder than he who is proud of his job, and people who are recognized for a job well done can't help but feel proud. It's what we've learned works in motivating kids at school, and it works with adults in their jobs.

Support staff is the backbone to project work. Project managers who see their contributions and recognize them are improving the whole team's chances of success.

Question

Do you remember an experience where having a good relationship with a person in a support position made a significant difference on a project?

Lessons:

- Figure out the people you need to nurture. A few people are not worth the effort, but most definitely are, and you can save yourself a lot of time and aggravation if you determine early on who can be motivated.
- It pays to nurture people and help them understand their importance to the overall value of the team.
- Respect people and you are much more likely to get more than you bargained for from them.
- Don't disregard lessons in life from previous experiences. What you learned in these different situations may be transferable to your current work.